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## A very tall tale indeed

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**The Ada Tree in Gippsland is one of the largest trees in the world, writes Paul Edwards.**

When a tree gets old and tumbles, it becomes a noble thing - a fallen tree - but when it is cut down it turns into a log. And so, in a moment of madness, the world's tallest tree became the world's longest log.

This is a story of two trees in Gippsland. One, in a paddock near Thorpdale in the Strzelecki Ranges, became a very long log. The other, still standing in the foothills of the Great Dividing Range, may be the most massive living thing in Australia.

Thorpdale's mighty mountain ash was felled by farmer Bill Cornthwaite back in 1884 and solemnly measured and verified by his brother George, a government surveyor.

The brothers agreed, when they had finished felling, measuring and verifying, that the log was 375 feet long, or 114.3 metres. So far as we know, the tree was in good nick and without the attention of the Cornthwaites could still have been alive today.

All that remains is a sign, unveiled in 1976 by the Honourable Jim Balfour. One wonders whether there was subtle irony in selecting the Honourable Jim to unveil the plaque to a chopped-up tree, since he was then the minister for fuel and power.

Fortunately the Ada Tree is very much alive and, although nobody is sure exactly how tall it is, nobody is about to cut it down to find out. The Department of Sustainability and Environment, which offers the tree a large degree of protection, says it is "about" 76 metres high. It is not possible to give a more accurate measurement. Not, that is, without reverting to the Cornthwaite method.

Timber millers have estimated that the Ada Tree, which for at least 300 years has been nourished by the headwaters of the Little Ada River between Powelltown and Noojee, may weigh 1130 tonnes. Its root system could extend over half a hectare (more than an acre).

Since there is an estimated 820 cubic metres of timber in its trunk alone, enough to build 66 average-sized homes, the Ada Tree would be worth a bit. But she's in the centre of a 600-hectare reserve, excluded from the clear-fell harvesting that is in operation about a kilometre away.

Almost certainly it is the biggest - as opposed to the tallest - hardwood tree in the world. The General Sherman sequoia of California tops out at 83 metres, but it's a slow-growing softwood that may have taken up to 2700 years to reach its current height.

In any case, the Ada Tree used to be bigger still. The top of its trunk has been blown away, either by high winds or a lightning strike. The Department of Sustainability and Environment thinks it may have topped 120 metres before it lost its head,

comfortably taller than the spires on St Patrick's Cathedral.

Whatever. The Ada Tree is a very big tree indeed, but as you walk the easy-graded track from the Ada River Road you'll see other giants - logs, not fallen trees - which seem to be just as big. The Cornthwaites are not guilty of these, which were felled about 50 years ago and left to rot.

More than 30 years ago prospector Werner Marschalek stumbled across the Ada Tree while fossicking for gold and gemstones, at a time when logging was virtually open slather. He says only the tree's phenomenal girth - 15.7 metres at shoulder height - saved it from the chainsaw.

"In a few square kilometres around her, even taller trees have been felled, some fairly recently," Marschalek says. "When some visitors come into this forest they burst into tears when they see the massive, rotting logs.

"Old-time timber-getters working with crosscut saws wouldn't have ripped down trees this size and left them to rot. Too much like hard work. But with power saws the easiest way to find out whether a tree is sound or rotten is to cut it down. In half an hour a 300-year-old tree is dead, and perhaps useless. Fortunately, I think the Ada Tree is with us until she dies of old age."

Paul Pearson, of the Department of Sustainability's Powelltown depot, agrees. "If anyone had a go at this tree there would be the biggest outcry the industry has ever known. This is a national treasure, although similar treasures have been felled in the past."

The Ada Tree stands in rainforest that is still largely uncharted. A few old logging tracks are now overgrown, and until Marschalek found the tree access was virtually impossible. Despite its soaring bulk, it is almost invisible from more than a few metres from its base, so dense is the vegetation.

With the help of friends, Marschalek blazed a trail through two kilometres of virgin forest and helped found an organisation named Friends of the Ada Tree. Now a gravel track has been laid, bridges built and a sympathetic viewing platform constructed. The platform serves to give visitors a look-but-don't-touch view of the immense tree.

At one stage prisoners from the former Pentridge jail and other Victorian correctional facilities were enlisted to help.

"We called them the chain gang," Marschalek recalls. "They really put their backs into the job, although they were a bit scared of the tiger snakes."

There is a car park on the gravel Ada River Road, which is accessed from the sealed Powelltown-Noojee Road. From this car park the tree can be reached by walking 1.6 kilometres along the Island Creek walking track.

The path meanders through cool rainforest with groves of ancient myrtle beech, sassafras and soft treefern. Flora and fauna are identified on signs along the way.

Another route, which can be taken back to the car park, is along the old Federal Road, a logging track for a deserted timber mill. There are toilets but no picnic facilities.

## **FAST FACTS**

Getting there: The site of the "tallest tree in the world" is at Thorpdale, in the heart of Gippsland's potato country. Access is via the Princes Highway; turn right at Trafalgar. Allow two hours from Melbourne. The Ada Tree, now a significant tourist attraction, can be accessed via Powelltown; turn right from the Warburton Highway at Yarra Junction, or Noojee; turn left from the Princes Highway on the Mount Baw Baw road. Gravel road to the Federal Mill car park. Allow two hours' drive; 30 minutes' walk.

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